

BACKGROUND WILLIAM GERTZ

Mystery over KGB Defector's Genuineness Still Brewing in US

The controversy within United States intelligence community continues to simmer at a slow boil over the case of Soviet KGB officer Vitaly Yurchenko.

Yurchenko defected to the West Aug. 1 in Rome and dramatically "redefected" at a carefully orchestrated press conference at the Soviet Embassy compound in Washington DC Nov. 2. The case has been a cause of embarrassment for U.S. intelligence officials left with the task of trying to sort out the information he supplied.

Newsweek magazine, citing intelligence officials, stated last week (Dec. 30) that U.S. officials have been given leads to "dozens and dozens" of Soviet agents in the U.S., including journalists on the KGB's payroll and others who serve as agents of influence.

Both FBI Director William Webster and CIA Director William Casey have certified Yurchenko a bona fide, but homesick defector, but with some trepidation. Webster went so far as to state publicly that it would be "sheer folly" for the Soviets to give up valuable information as a means to affect public opinion prior to the Geneva summit.

Now, however, intelligence sources say Yurchenko has become suspect by some counterintelligence specialists within the intelligence community who say the information he provided, while valuable, lacked the quality of detail that a KGB officer who held the rank of "general-designate" could turn over to the West.

They point out that Yurchenko's naval career, as a counterintelligence official on a submarine, does not fit the career path of an upper echelon KGB official. According to a biography released by the CIA, Yurchenko was responsible for everything from KGB North American operations to training border guards in Moscow.

"He did everything but run the war in Afghanistan," one intelligence expert quipped.

Yet to date, the only arrest to come directly from Yurchenko's testimony was the arrest of former NSA analyst Ronald Pelton who was charged with providing top secret information on U.S. electronic listening posts.

Former CIA operations trainee Edward Howard fled the country from under an FBI net after leads from Yurchenko revealed he had offered secrets to the Soviets. FBI Director Webster said the FBI was planning to arrest Howard "within hours" of the time he disappeared.

Both men were described by intelligence sources as "dead cases" given up by the Soviets in order to establish Yurchenko's bona fides.

Intelligence experts who suspect Yurchenko was a plant sent by Moscow point to a number of factors that cast doubt on Yurchenko's credibility.

The biggest problem from the case is trying to sort out the damage to U.S. intelligence from Yurchenko's return. With both FBI and CIA officials convinced, at least publically, of Yurchenko's sincerity, counterintelligence specialists point out that Yurchenko's reports on the U.S. agent network were "vague." They say an official in Yurchenko's position would have known the exact names of agents working for the Soviets.

"At a minimum, he should have given up the entire North American 'illegal' network," said one intelligence expert who doubted Yurchenko's legitimacy. Illegals are agents operating under deep cover and using non-diplomatic communications networks to communicate with Moscow.

Another intelligence source said the worst element of the Yurchenko case is the amount of "disinformation" the KGB official succeeded in channelling through the CIA to allied intelligence services.

The source said Yurchenko has cast aspersions on the CIA, and its director William Casey, created a "spy scare" in the United States, and succeeded in setting an example for other would be KGB defectors during an important preliminary period in the reign of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev must direct the significant Communist Party Congress set for February in Moscow.

With the ongoing Yurchenko controversy in the U.S. intelligence community, other intelligence successes have been given little visibility since late fall.

But intelligence sources point out that Soviet GRU military intelligence official Sergei Bokhan continues to cooperate with Allied intelligence officials.

Bokhan, the GRU chief in Athens, defected to the West last May, but his family was not so lucky — Greek officials turned over Bokhan's wife and child to the Soviets who quickly spirited them out of the country.

Last September, Bokhan supplied the Greek government with the names of 5 Soviet agents, including a naval

officer, who were charged with passing secrets to the Soviet in exchange for money.

U.S. officials would not say how

many more arrests were expected, but details of the Greek government's investigation were leaked to an Athens newspaper late last month. The pro-Socialist weekly *Sunday Freedom of the Press* printed two top secret government documents on the case describing leaks by the five Soviet agents "very much of a secondary nature." The documents detailed how the spies made contact with Soviet Embassy officials and how the naval officer denied the charges.

The United States and the socialist government of Andreas Papandreu have been at odds over a number of anti-American policies, including the introduction of Soviet military advisors within the councils of the NATO alliance.

Another setback for the KGB was the defection in Great Britain of one of the KGB's youngest chiefs, Oleg Gordievski.

Gordievski, according to British intelligence sources, began cooperating with Western intelligence in 1974 while stationed in Copenhagen and continued operating as a double agent in place until he was secreted out of the Soviet Union by British intelligence. His defection was announced last September in London.

His defection led to a diplomatic and journalistic expulsion match between London and Moscow. According to intelligence sources, about 100 Britons have been linked to Soviet intelligence as the result of Gordievski's leads.

The only arrest so far was the case of former MI5 counterspy Michael John Bettaney who was caught passing secrets to the Soviets in 1982.

Sources said Gordievski tipped off the British to Bettaney's contact with the Soviet embassy in London. To protect Gordievski, British officials testified that Bettaney was caught by a surveillance, when it was Gordievski who was on the inside as an embassy political officer at the time.

He also persuaded Soviet officials that Bettaney's secrets were "disinformation."

Gordievski was well-placed within the KGB at the time of his defection. He was named station chief a year ago in January, but handled the Soviet active measures operations against the British and also worked with the illegal agent networks, having handled illegals in West Germany and Denmark from 1972 to 1978.

Sources said Gordievski, who was among the up and coming generation of Soviet leaders, defected because of what he perceived was the duplicity between overt Soviet efforts aimed at accommodation with the West and the secret program of subversion and destabilization.